

# Can American Democracy Survive? Six Trends That Hold the Answer

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For the first time in my life, I fear for my country. I am not sure that American democracy will survive. Oh, I think the form will survive, elections, a Congress, but the substance of fair elections, every citizen with the right to vote, and encouraged to do so, will be gone. America will be rigged as surely as Putin has rigged Russia, as surely as any South American dictatorship, the Soviet Union under Stalin, or Germany under Hitler. Democracies are not easy to maintain. The fact that the U.S. has done it for more than two centuries is historically amazing. And I am not alone in this thinking. One hundred of the leading scholars of American democracy, driven by this concern, issued the following statement on the first of June 2021:

“We, the undersigned, are scholars of democracy who have watched the recent deterioration of U.S. elections and liberal democracy with growing alarm. Specifically, we have watched with deep concern as Republican-led state legislatures across the country have in recent months proposed or implemented what we consider radical changes to core electoral procedures in response to unproven and intentionally destructive allegations of a stolen election. Collectively, these initiatives are transforming several states into political systems that no longer meet the minimum conditions for free and fair elections. Hence, our entire democracy is now at risk.”<sup>1</sup>

On my daily web publication, [www.schwartzreport.net](http://www.schwartzreport.net), I have been telling my readers for years now that the Republican Party is actively and explicitly working to sabotage democracy in America. My position is not political, at least not in terms of partisanship. It is simply based on well-substantiated facts. I see politics from the perspective of anthropology, and my calculation is does this party’s policies produce objectively verifiable wellbeing?

What worries me is not the Republic politicians, as awful as they are: Matt Gaetz, Ron Johnson, Jim Jordan, Marjorie Taylor Greene, Louie Gohmert, and dozens of others. I still find it amazing that 147 Republicans voted to overturn the 2020 election results, and they have faced no consequences. What really concerns me is that the problem facing America is Americans.

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Politicians draw their glow and power from the populace who elected them. They are manifestations as much as sources, and they know that.

The Gallup Organization regularly polls American adults for their political views and party affiliation. As of January-March 2021, “Forty-eight percent of U.S. adults on average in 2020 identified as Democrats or were independents who leaned toward the Democratic Party, while 43% were Republicans or Republican-leaning independents. The five-point Democratic advantage is consistent with the partisan balance Gallup measured over the previous four years, and is similar to the average four-point Democratic advantage (47% to 43%) over the past two decades.”<sup>2</sup>

It is particularly threatening to the nation's wellbeing, that about a third of Americans believe they would be happy in a White supremacy authoritarian, christofascist state.<sup>3</sup> They pay lip service to democracy, but have no interest in its substance, and are psychopathically detached from a fact-based reality.

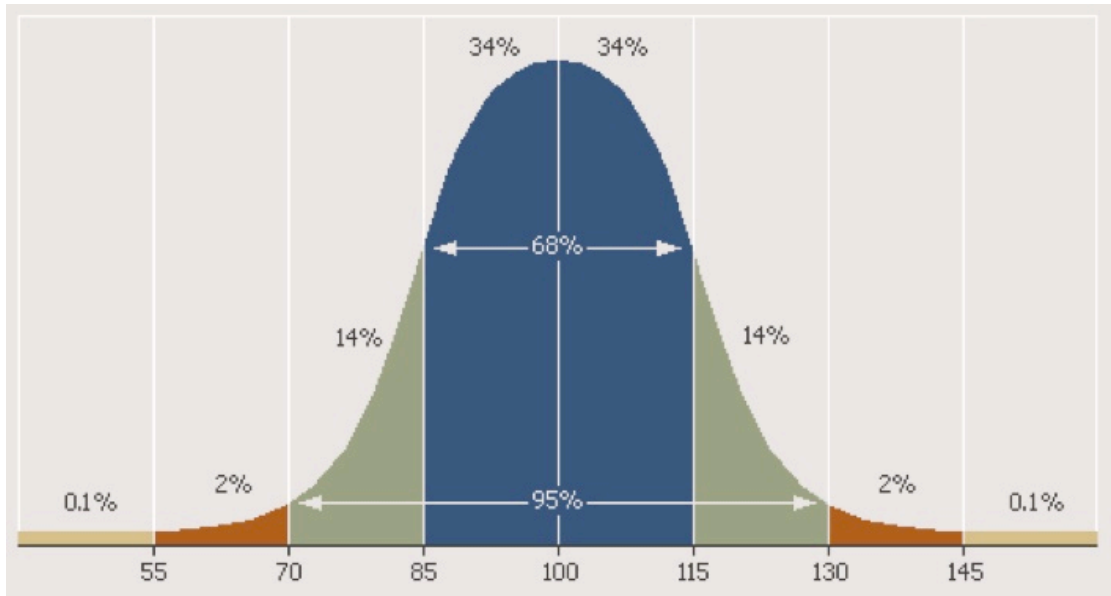
The Washington-based Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), surveyed over 5,500 adults in all 50 states over a two week period in early March 2021. They found that, “Over 30 Million Americans Believe in QAnon’s Most Outrageous Conspiracy: “The government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles which run a global child sex trafficking operation.”<sup>4</sup>

How is it possible such drivel is believed to be true by millions of Americans? What has happened to the United States? I believe there are six trends that have brought us to this point:

- 1.) **The Provincial Trend:** In the richest most influential nation in the world, 64% of Americans have never been outside the borders of the United States.<sup>5</sup> They have no real conception of what such a racist authoritarian, fascist state would be like, or what totalitarianism does to a culture. Americans are extraordinarily provincial. Again, such a statement is seen as political, when it should really be seen anthropologically. It is a fact. A survey conducted 2019 by OnePoll found that “11 percent of respondents have never left the state in which they were born, and 54 percent said they have visited fewer than 10 states.”<sup>6</sup>
- 2.) **The Low I.Q., Low Information Trend:** The average IQ in the U.S. is 98, and in the Red value states particularly it is even lower. I.Q. measurement is controversial to some, but it is a measure taken everywhere by consistent instruments. Here are the estimated average IQ rates for residents of each U.S. state as compiled by Michael McDaniel, formerly a professor at Virginia Commonwealth University, and reported by *The Washington Post*.<sup>7</sup>

Massachusetts 104.3  
New Hampshire 104.2  
North Dakota 103.8  
Vermont 103.8  
Minnesota 103.7  
Maine 103.4  
Montana 103.4  
Iowa 103.2  
Connecticut 103.1  
Wisconsin 102.9  
Kansas 102.8  
New Jersey 102.8  
South Dakota 102.8  
Wyoming 102.4  
Nebraska 102.3  
Virginia 101.9  
Washington 101.9  
Ohio 101.8  
Indiana 101.7  
Colorado 101.6  
Pennsylvania 101.5  
Idaho 101.4  
Oregon 101.2  
Utah 101.1  
Missouri 101  
New York 100.7  
Michigan 100.5  
Delaware 100.4  
North Carolina 100.2  
Texas 100  
Illinois 99.9  
Maryland 99.7  
Rhode Island 99.5  
Kentucky 99.4  
Oklahoma 99.3  
Alaska 99  
West Virginia 98.7  
Florida 98.4  
South Carolina 98.4

Georgia 98  
Tennessee 97.7  
Arkansas 97.5  
Arizona 97.4  
Nevada 96.5  
Alabama 95.7  
New Mexico 95.7  
Hawaii 95.6  
California 95.5  
Louisiana 95.3  
Mississippi 94.2

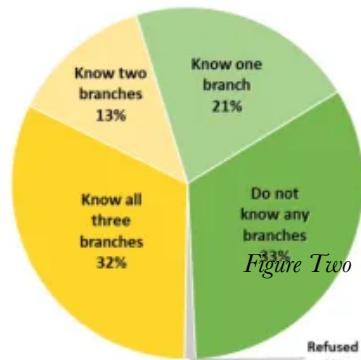


*Bell Curve of U.S. IQ distribution*

*Figure One*

Combine this with the fact that even though the rate of high school completion is as high as it has ever been, still 10% of adult Americans have not completed high school<sup>8</sup> And even those with higher education have extraordinary lacunae about the most basic knowledge of their

**% of people who can name the three branches of government**



Source: Annenberg Constitution Day Civics Survey, August 8-12, 2018. Annenberg Public Policy Center

government. In a 2018 survey by the Annenberg Public Policy Center, “Only 32 percent of Americans were able to correctly name all three branches of government. (See *Figure Two*)”<sup>9</sup>

Thomas Jefferson saw the problem at the country’s founding. In a letter he wrote to Charles Yancy, he said, “If a nation expects to be ignorant & free, in a state of civilisation, it expects what never was & never will be. The functionaries of every government have propensities to command at will the liberty & property of their constituents. There is no safe deposit for these but with the people themselves; nor can they be safe with them without information. Where the press is free and every man able to read, all is safe.”<sup>10</sup> Given the attempted insurrection we just

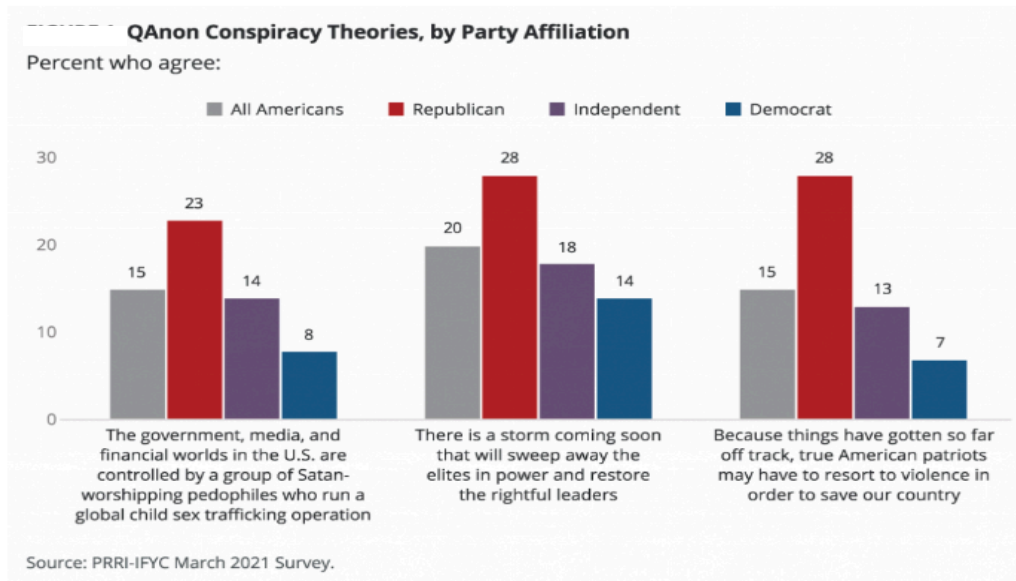
witnessed on January 6, it is one of those coincidences that charm historians that Jefferson’s letter is dated January 6, 1816.

3.) **The Social Media Trend.** What Jefferson could not see is what today has become one of the greatest threats to democracy in the second decade of the 20<sup>th</sup> century: Social Media. For most of American history and the world Jefferson knew what we see on social media today were called rumors, and they were passed around in bars, barbershops, beauty parlors, and the parlors of the gentry. Their range and penetration were limited. Beginning in the 1970s, and growing year by year, that has changed, and the world of Facebook, Twitter, Linked in, Instagram, TikTok and a host of others has emerged. The problem we face in sustaining democracy is that too large a percentage of the voter population is not low information. The problem is that with the rise of the internet the capacity of disinformation to be promulgated has increased exponentially, and they live in a biased fact-free world that feeds their fears and prejudices but does not educate in any true sense. This is having a profound effect on American democracy.

In spite of multiple election audits and dozens of court decisions affirming the integrity of the 2020 elections, Reuters working with IPSOS reported that a national poll conducted months after the election still showed on May 17-19 2021 “that 53% of Republicans believe Trump, their party's nominee, is the ‘true president’ now, compared to 3% of Democrats and 25% of all Americans.”<sup>11</sup> A quarter of Americans, that’s 83 million people. But it gets weirder. The Public Religion Research Institute (PRRI), based on March 2021 research reported that, “a nontrivial 15% of Americans agree with the sweeping QAnon allegation that the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation,” while the vast majority of Americans (82%) disagree with this statement.

Republicans (23%) are significantly more likely than independents (14%) and Democrats (8%) to agree that the government, media, and financial worlds in the U.S. are controlled by a group of Satan-worshipping pedophiles who run a global child sex trafficking operation.”<sup>12</sup> (See Figure Three)

4.) **The Amygdala Trend:** The amygdala is an almond shaped structure deep within the temporal lobe of the brain. In every species that has an amygdala, including ourselves, it has the same function. It is activated during periods of fear, stress, or a threat, and with sufficient stress it takes over. Sometimes it is the heroic response to save your life from a perceived threat. Sometimes the context is much darker. In both cases this activation overrides rational thought, and that has



*Figure Three*

all kinds of implications. Although it may seem arcane to some, the amygdala has a direct impact on American democracy.

“Humans who have overactive right amygdalas are motivated more by fear, anger, and resentment than they are by facts. What matters socially is that this response turns out to be highly political. Researchers at University College London show “greater conservatism was associated with increased volume of the right amygdala.”<sup>13</sup>

The researchers also found that “greater liberalism was associated with increased gray matter volume in the anterior cingulate cortex” -- a region in the brain that is believed to help people manage complexity. The study also reported that conservatives’ brains had smaller anterior cingulates -- the part of the brain responsible for courage and optimism. This is neuroscience as politics. And we need to understand it more clearly because it is shaping our world. Neurologist Geraint Rees makes the point: “It is very significant because it does suggest there is something

about political attitudes that are either encoded in our brain structure through our experience or that our brain structure in some way determines or results in our political attitudes.”<sup>14</sup>

Seven years ago in these pages I wrote about this psychophysiological aspect of our politics, and thus our democracy, “If this research is telling us anything it is that the schism that is tearing the United States apart has a neurological basis that cannot be resolved by reason or facts. So where does that leave us? First, that all consciousness is interdependent and interconnected. Second, the fear that is so much a part of American culture today may be arising from precognitive awareness, a presentiment with psycho-neurological consequences that in turn has political and social consequences. Third, that this fear response affects a significant percentage of our population.”<sup>15</sup>

Over roughly the past 15 years a confluence of the social and neurosciences has presented us with research findings that describe a politics driven by psychophysiology far more than rational thought. In this emerging fact-based world, we are driven by hormones, group dynamics, and the way we respond to negative stimuli. In 2001 Roy Baumeister, Francis Eppes Professor of Psychology at Florida State University, reported,

“The greater power of bad events over good ones is found in everyday events, major life events (e.g., trauma), close relationship outcomes, social network patterns, interpersonal interactions, and learning processes. Bad emotions, bad parents, and bad feedback have more impact than good ones, and bad information is processed more thoroughly than good. The self is more motivated to avoid bad self-definitions than to pursue good ones. Bad impressions and bad stereotypes are quicker to form and more resistant to disconfirmation than good ones. Various explanations such as diagnosticity and salience help explain some findings, but the greater power of bad events is still found when such variables are controlled. Hardly any exceptions (indicating greater power of good) can be found. Taken together, these findings suggest that bad is stronger than good, as a general principle across a broad range of psychological phenomena.”<sup>16</sup>

Political psychologist John Hibbing, Foundation Regents University Professor at the University of Nebraska – Lincoln, along with Kevin Smith and John Alford also in the Political Science Department, set out to explore this issue in depth and published their findings: “Difference in negativity bias underlie variation in political ideology” which was published in *Behavioral and Brain Sciences*. “...We argue that one organizing element of the many differences between liberals and conservatives is the nature of their physiological and psychological responses to features of the environment that are negative. Compared with liberals, conservatives tend to register greater physiological responses to such stimuli and also to devote more psychological resources to them.... Politics might not be in our souls, but it probably is in our DNA.”<sup>17</sup>

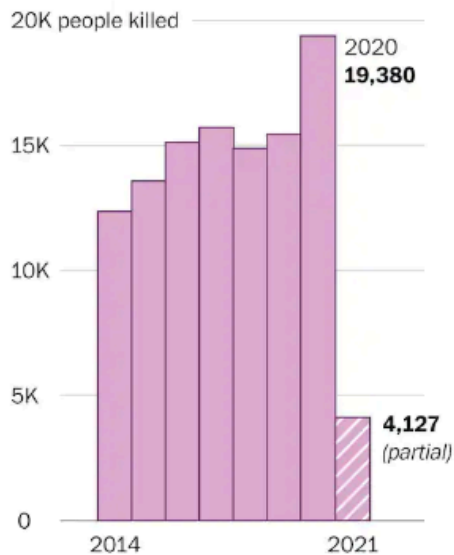
This is straightforwardly the psychophysiology of politics and it is having a negative effect on the health of American democracy.

5.) **The White Supremacy Trend:** For the first time in 500 years, since the beginning of the Age of Exploration in the 15<sup>th</sup> century, being born White is not conferring automatic privilege. In the United States this trend is strongly exacerbated by the fact that an historical White majority country is becoming very quickly a majority minority population and about a third of American Whites are completely freaked out by that. The core of White Supremacy is the belief that the White race has been responsible for most of the good things in human history: the great art, great science, and great thinking, and that Whites are inherently superior. Until recently only the crassest advocates, people like David Duke and Richard Spencer, would state it that boldly, but it is the foundation of alt-right or identitarian politics however cloaked in bonhomie.

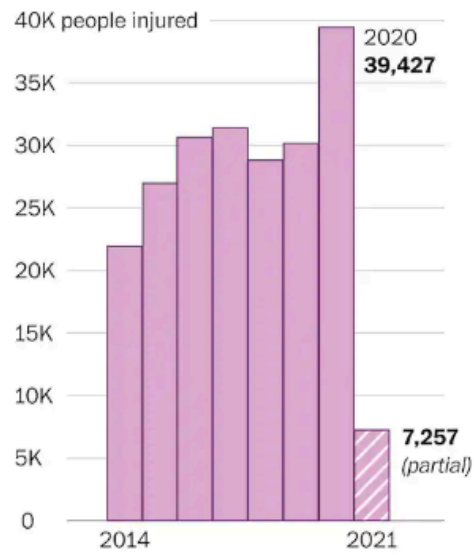
6.) **The Second Amendment Trend.** Uniquely in the world of developed democratic nations, the United States has a gun crisis that each year kills tens of thousands of people. The numbers are staggering. (See Figure three)

### 2020 was a record year for gun violence

**Gun deaths by year**



**Gun injuries by year**



Note: Counts do not include the roughly 20,000-25,000 gun-related suicide deaths that occur each year.

Source: Gun Violence Archive

DANIELLE RINDLER/THE WASHINGTON POST

As of 10 May 2021 there were 194 mass shootings in the previous 18 weeks, and as I write this news reports are coming in that in at a graduation party in Kendall, Florida, three people were killed, and five others wounded.<sup>18</sup> Mass gun murders are so common and so random America has



become a dangerous place, unlike any other developed democracy. In 2019, CNN reported, “Close U.S. allies have long warned their citizens about the risks of exploring the United States. And while most online advisories rank the US as safe to visit, many also make mention of domestic mass shooting, typically characterized as terrorism...” and the concern has only increased since then.<sup>19</sup>

America’s obsessive gun crisis is already impacting American democracy. I have written about this at length so will note here only that the Second Amendment Crisis is directly link linked to the White Supremacy Crisis, and both are severely destructive to American democracy.<sup>20</sup> Carol Anderson, the Charles Howard Professor of African America Studies at Emory puts it very well. “For too long, the second amendment has been portrayed with a founding fathers aura swaddled in the stars and stripes.

“But ‘a well-regulated militia’ wasn’t, as the story goes, about how valiant and effective the militias were in repelling the British. [George Washington](#) was disgusted with their lack of fighting ability and the way the men would just cut and run from battling against a professional army. Nor was the militia reliable as a force to uphold the law. In Shays’ Rebellion, bands of armed white men, who were in the state’s militia, attacked the Massachusetts government because of foreclosures and debt seizures, demonstrating, again, how unreliable the militia were. Boston merchants had to hire mercenaries to put down the rebellion.

“On the other hand, where the militia had been steadfast was in controlling the enslaved Black population. Access to guns for White people was essential for this function.”<sup>21</sup>

White militias and anyone conversant with the social outcome research will tell you that White militias are the biggest threat of violence in the country. Looking back to the colonial period White militias have always existed and always been a problem. Anthropologically they are essentially violence cults. We got a hint of what they are capable of on 6 January when the Proud Boys, the Oath Keepers, and other similar groups attempted an insurrection at the Capitol. These are men and women acting out against what is known in this cohort as the Great Replacement. They believe that Whites will be replaced by non-Whites, either native or immigrants. They cannot envision a cooperative world, and they are willing to become violent in defense of that view. But in terms of this trends effect on democracy, that is just part of the problem. White supremacist militia members have infiltrated the police and military across the country.

According to the Brennan Center For Justice, whose social outcome data is universally respected, reported, “Police reforms, often imposed after incidents of racist misconduct or brutality, have focused on addressing these unconscious manifestations of bias. The U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ), for example, has required implicit bias training as part of consent decrees it imposes to root out discriminatory practices in law enforcement agencies. Such training measures are

designed to help law enforcement officers recognize these unconscious biases in order to reduce their influence on police behavior.

“These reforms, while well-intentioned, leave unaddressed an especially harmful form of bias, which remains entrenched within law enforcement: explicit racism. Explicit racism in law enforcement takes many forms, from membership or affiliation with violent white supremacist or far-right militant groups, to engaging in racially discriminatory behavior toward the public or law enforcement colleagues... In 2017, the FBI reported that white supremacists posed a “persistent threat of lethal violence” that has produced more fatalities than any other category of domestic terrorists since 2000.”<sup>22</sup>

The election of 2022 is going to tell us how these six trends play out. Whether they destroy American democracy or we awaken to the threats they pose, and we address them with fostering wellbeing as the highest priority. It is up to you and me to preserve democracy. Are you prepared to do what it will take?

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